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ABSTRACT

In 1988, California voters passed a constitutional ballot initiative, Proposition 98, that required local districts to publish School Accountability Report Cards containing information on specific school characteristics. This study documents some key events leading to the passage of Proposition 98 and the subsequent implementation of the report cards. Events leading up to Proposition 98 include the publication of numerous national reports indicating the failure of public schools in the United States, the passage of the Hughes-Hart Education Report Act of 1983, a study in 1987 by Policy Analysis for California Education describing the poor state of financing in state public schools, and the institution of annual statewide and individual school performance reports. Proposition 98 requires more detailed reports of school performance and characteristics than were previously required and sets minimum funding levels for public schools and community colleges. The California State Department of Education and the Association of California School Administrators developed models of school accountability report cards; these models are compared and contrasted. The role of the California Parent-Teacher Association is also discussed. Overall, the program has been a cooperative effort involving legislators, bureaucrats, administrators, teachers, and parents, and the system of accountability that results will likely be achieved through numerous political compromises. Even so, the experience presumably still has value in getting people to work together for positive ends. (TJH)

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Refining a Performance Accountability System in California: A Case Study of a Constitutional Initiative

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Refining a Performance Accountability System in California:
A Case Study of a Constitutional Initiative

"Accountability" in its ordinary sense has a negative connotation. Common synonyms are "blame," "fault," and "guilt." To say, metaphorically, that the nation, or schools, or children are at risk raises the question of accountability? Who put them at risk? Who is responsible for saving them? How and at what cost can they be rescued? The California State Department of Education, in common with many other state and federal education agencies, shared this perception of a troubled education system (Fetler, 1986; Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1988; Mirga, 1989; Kaagan and Coley, 1989), and in response has undertaken to establish accountability mechanisms. Is accountability a rational device for managing change in schools? Or is it merely a political symbol evoked in response to a crisis in public confidence?

How do education accountability systems work? Ideally, one might begin with a model of how the education system functions, specifying major inputs, processes and outputs. Use the model to identify the problems and devise indicators to measure the salient variables. Solutions are tried out and the indicators are monitored to gauge effectiveness. Such system designs and analyses have intuitive appeal and apparently have worked well in many situations. (See, for example, Kaagan and Coley, 1989.) What might be some limitations to a systems approach to accountability? Education systems are complex. While it is not an objective of this study to describe the governance of education in any detail, (See, for example, PACE, 1987.) some groups which influence how schools are run include state government, local district offices, local boards of education, teachers, and parents. Examples of different issues which are probably not ranked the same in importance by these groups include safety, class size, teacher training and evaluation, test scores, administrator and teacher salaries, textbooks, instructional leadership, and curriculum standards. Is it possible that these different interest groups, perhaps all with the common goal of "providing students with a high quality education," could define accountability differently? Considering the potential for assignment of blame, guilt, or fault, would it be surprising if these groups sought involvement in the design of accountability systems?

In 1988 California voters passed a constitutional ballot initiative, Proposition 98, which required local districts to publish School Accountability Report Cards containing information on specific school characteristics. Different interest groups including the California PTA, the California School Boards Association, the Association of California School Administrators, the State Department of Education, and the legislature have had the opportunity to shape and comment on the School Accountability Report Cards. This study documents some key events

leading up to the passage of Proposition 98, and the subsequent implementation of the report cards.

The Road to Proposition 98: Recent History

Numerous national reports published in the early 1980s left little public doubt that the schools had failed. The California legislature in 1983 passed the Hughes-Hart Education Reform Act (SB 813), with over 60 separate reforms and new funding, which encouraged higher pupil achievement, accountability standards for teachers, increased instructional time, tougher graduation standards, and incentives for student, teacher and school performance. Besides the much advertised failure of public schools, what other events preceded this legislation? A 1987 study by Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) described California's school finance in the early 1980s as "unstable and uncertain." California's tax reform measures in the 1970s (Kirst, 1990) cut property taxes in half and severely limited the ability of state and local governments to expend revenues. These fiscal measures tended to centralize educational finance at the state level. Funding, in constant dollars, declined, student enrollments increased. The rapidly growing minority population of students, bringing increased linguistic diversity and often poverty, imposed additional burdens.

What are the effects of new funding and reform programs? Are funds being expended wisely? How can local schools and districts be encouraged to make the reforms work? How can parents, teachers, principals, and officials know which schools are effective and which are failing? Which policies are working and which need to be amended? SB 813 did not itself contain any provisions for answering these questions.

California's State Department of Education in 1984 started its own accountability program. The avowed purposes of this program were "to allow educators to determine the success of their own school programs, sustain support for the reform movement by demonstrating such success, recognize schools for their progress and achievements, and discover how to use the resources available for education in the most effective manner possible." (California State Department of Education, 1988) The components of the accountability program include an annual statewide performance report on the status of uniform educational quality indicators, annual individual school reports of progress, school self-reports on local quality indicators, and a program of school recognition. The indicators are intended to be "bottom line" measures of performance. Time lines are set for the attainment of state and local goals for each indicator. Judgements are made on the basis of comparisons of the school with itself over time, of the school with all other schools statewide, and of the school with other demographically similar schools. (Fetler; 1986,1989)

Every public school receives an annual performance report containing a discussion of the accountability program, an explanation of the performance indicators, statewide results and goals, a display of the indicators for that particular school, and a discussion of the concept of locally produced reports. Reports for high schools contain information on academic course enrollments,

California Assessment Program (CAP) achievement, attendance, dropouts, the Scholastic Aptitude Test, the American College Testing program, and enrollments at public post secondary institutions. Much of the information is presented by sex and ethnic classification. Two copies of each school's report are sent to the district office. One of these copies is passed on to the school. The local districts have about two weeks to examine the reports before they are released to the media.

What has been the reaction to the school performance reports? A survey of school board members, district superintendents and central office staff done by the Department of Education (Fetler, 1986) found strong support for the concepts of quality indicators and accountability. There was less support for the Department's particular implementation. School board members were more likely than the superintendents or office staff to consider the accountability goals to be realistic or the approach to be fair. The California Business Roundtable (1988) recommended strengthening the school performance reports so that they are accessible to parents and using them to identify failing schools.

A study reported by OERI (1988) asked educators at the state, district, school and classroom levels in California, Florida and Georgia how state accountability systems affect school level activities, what resource burdens the accountability systems imposed, and how accountability results are used. The survey found that accountability systems have changed local district and school practices. These changes focused more on improving performance on state tests than on broader institutional and curricular goals. An important resource issue is in the amount of time required to prepare students for testing, particularly considering that many districts have their own testing programs which are run parallel to the state's program. Although educators at local schools and districts apparently have responded to state accountability systems, many do not view test scores as valid or useful measures of performance. Even though other measures, e.g. graduation rates, and college attendance, are recognized as important, the state is seen to be primarily interested in test scores and most efforts are channeled into that one direction.

A Constitutional Ballot Initiative

Kirst (1990) observed that teacher unions sponsored Proposition 98 in order to guarantee education a larger share of the state budget. The California Teachers Association spent over seven million dollars on Proposition 98. The ballot in California's 1988 general election offered voters the opportunity to amend the state's constitution to establish a minimum level of state funding for schools, and to require the preparation of School Accountability Report Cards. The Legislative Analyst's report published in the Ballot Pamphlet (California Secretary of State, 1988) outlined the main features of this initiative for the voters. Because Proposition 98 primarily related to school finance and not accountability, it is useful to understand the fiscal context. Before 1988, the California Constitution limited the amount of taxes that could be appropriated by government, including local school districts, subject to adjustments for inflation and population. Any excess revenues, which could not be appropriated, must be returned to voters.

The ballot initiative, Proposition 98, altered this spending limit by specifying a minimum level of funding for public schools and community colleges. The minimum funding level is set either at the percentage that was allocated in 1986-87, or as the same total amount of funds received from state and local tax revenues in the prior year, whichever is larger. In addition, schools and community colleges receive any excess revenues, beyond the limit set in the Constitution. Excess revenues which are received permanently increase the minimum funding levels. The additional funds are required to be used for instructional improvement and accountability. Proposition 98 required the Superintendent of Public Instruction to develop a Model School Accountability Report Card, which contains information on thirteen school conditions, including:

- Student achievement in and progress toward meeting reading, writing, arithmetic, and other academic goals.
- Progress towards reducing dropout rates
- Estimated expenditures per student and types of services funded
- Progress toward reducing class sizes and teaching loads
- Any assignment of teachers outside their subject areas of competence
- Quality and currency of textbooks and other instructional materials
- The availability of qualified personnel to provide counseling and other student support services
- Availability of qualified substitute teachers
- Safety, cleanliness, and adequacy of school facilities
- Adequacy of teacher evaluations and opportunities for professional improvement
- Classroom discipline and climate for learning
- Teacher and staff training and curriculum improvement programs
- Quality of school instruction and leadership

The ballot initiative required each public school district board to issue an annual School Accountability Report Card for each of its schools which addresses at a minimum each of the thirteen conditions. Local boards are not required to adopt the state model, but must compare their local documents with the state model at least once every three years.

Ed Foglia, President of the California Teachers Association, and Helen H. Lindsey, President of the California PTA, Bill Honig, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, and Ray Tolcacher, President of the Association of California School Administrators wrote the arguments in favor of Proposition 98 for the Ballot Pamphlet. They point out that classes are overcrowded, that essential subjects are being neglected, and that there is a dearth of counselors to work with students. Since 1978 both the percent of local property tax dollars for schools and the percent of personal income spent on public education has decreased. Proposition 98 addresses these problems by ensuring a minimum funding level, by requiring that budget surpluses over the spending limit go for instructional improvements, and by making schools accountable.

The argument against Proposition 98 was signed by George Deukmejian, Governor, George Christopher, Chairman of the California Commission on Educational Quality, and Richard P. Simpson, Executive Vice President of the California Taxpayer's Association. They point out that Proposition 98 guarantees certain levels of funding to schools regardless of other vital state and local needs and regardless of whether schools are doing a good job in spending those funds and teaching children. Beyond this, Proposition 98 does away with the limit on state spending imposed by a vote of the people, and it will likely cause an increase in taxes. Many of the most effective reforms, e.g., more homework, parental involvement, increased discipline and rigor, do not take additional money, but rather are the result of increased commitment by principals, teachers, students, and parents.

Comparison of SDE & ACSA models

Proposition 98 required the State Department of Education (SDE) to develop and present to the State Board of Education a model School Accountability Report Card (California State Department of Education, 1989). The Association of California School Administrators (ACSA, 1989) developed its own model "in order to assist the State Board in its deliberations, and to insure that the specifications and reporting requirements of the state's model were not burdensome on school site administrators." Why did ACSA and SDE develop different models? Some reasons for the differences are discussed in an article published in Thrust, an ACSA journal. (Stephenson, 1989) The article notes that the Superintendent of Public Instruction was required by Proposition 98 to consult with a Task Force on Instructional Improvement, composed of teachers, administrators, parents, school board members, classified employees and researchers. The initial result of this consultation was a 27 page document, calling for new data collection, and reporting in more areas than the 13 required by Proposition 98. In response, ACSA lobbied the State Board of Education not to accept this long document and assembled its own group to develop an alternative model to be considered by the State Board of Education. The guiding principles adopted by the ACSA group were to keep the report card simple, to focus on the assessment areas required by law, and to use data sources that are readily available to all schools. The primary audience for the report card should be the parents within a school's attendance boundaries. Ultimately, The State Board of Education did accept ACSA's model in large measure, but with some changes in emphases.

ACSA described its model as differing from the state model in part by: using a simpler display of expenditures; requiring less detailed reporting of class sizes and teaching loads; allowing optional use of comparative data on student achievement; and permitting a simpler description of student support services. Additional differences in the two models are apparent from an examination of their statements of general principles. Both models cite a main objective to be informing the local school community about conditions and progress being made at schools. ACSA goes on to state that "comparisons with other school sites or to statewide standards is permissible, but is not required." The relationship between the report cards, school accreditation reports, and program quality reviews is another area of difference. ACSA notes that the report cards are not intended to replace or duplicate accreditation reports or program reviews, and that data collection should rely on existing sources where possible. The Department of Education stresses that the report cards should be viewed as complementing, not duplicating these other assessments, that is, "review teams should use report cards as a source of valuable information and self-assessment, and report cards should draw important information about school conditions from the various reviews and reports." Differences between the ACSA and the SDE models in their recommendations for the specific assessment areas are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparison of the SDE and ACSA Guidelines for Reporting on the Proposition 98 Assessment Areas

Assessment Area	Similarities	Differences
Achievement	Report state mandated test (CAP) results for the last 3 years, and locally administered measures.	SDE also suggests that both state and local measures be reported in relation to national, state or other benchmarks.
Dropout Rates	Report those dropout statistics collected by the state (CBEDS) over the last 3 years, as well as intervention programs to promote attendance and/or reduce dropout rates	SDE also suggests reporting actual attendance or absence rates by grade level.

Expenditures and Services	Report per student General Fund and categorical fund expenditures. List types of services funded, including categorical and special programs	SDE suggests comparing school per student general fund expenditures to district averages and describing the allocation of general fund expenditures among direct pupil services, student support services, and district costs.
Class Size and Teaching Loads	Report the average class size by grade level and for the school. For high schools and middle schools with departmentalized programs report average teaching load Describe plans, programs, and progress in reducing class sizes or teaching loads.	SDE suggests also reporting the distribution of class sizes and teaching loads.
Teacher's Assignments	Report the number of teachers assigned to classrooms outside of their credential authorization, with explanations as needed.	
Textbooks and Instructional Materials	Describe whether the textbooks and instructional materials are in sufficient supply and of acceptable quality. Describe additional resources to support instruction.	
Counseling and Student Support	List by job title all qualified personnel assigned to provide counseling and other support services and time spent in that capacity.	SDE recommends also displaying case loads in comparison to statewide averages or professionally recognized standards.
Substitute Teachers	Report difficulties in securing qualified substitutes and if this has affected the instructional program.	

School Facilities and Safety	Describe the maintenance schedule, financial allocations for up-keep, statistics fromthe Standard School Crime Report, and preparations for ensuring campus safety. Use a survey of the school community of perceived safety, cleanliness and general satisfaction.	
Teacher Evaluation	Describe teacher evaluation procedures and criteria. List opportunities for professional development.	
Classroom Discipline and Climate	List programs and practices to promote a positive learning environment, describe the discipline plan, and report suspensions and expulsions from the previous year.	
Training and Curriculum Improvement	Describe training and curriculum improvement activities.	
Quality of Instruction and Leadership	Assess the instructional plan and its alignment with the state frameworks. Describe the role of the leadership team in ensuring quality. Describe efforts to address the needs of special student populations. Describe affirmative action steps taken to inform students, parents and staff of rights for equitable treatment.	

New Directions: Reactions and Concerns

The PTA, in a news release issued after the State Board adopted its model (California Congress of Parents, Teachers, and Students, Inc., 1989), stressed its view that the School Accountability Report Card should help parents to exercise their right "to be informed about their schools' conditions and progress." There should be a role for PTA units in collecting information for the Report Cards, in serving on relevant committees, and in sharing of the Report Card information through the sponsorship of public meetings. Although the California PTA did not issue its own model, it did propose that parents ask certain questions when reviewing the school accountability report card.

- If class size and teaching load are being reduced, how is this being done?
- If teachers are being assigned outside their subject areas, what are the reasons for their assignments?
- If the drop-out rate is being reduced, which methods for reduction are proving effective?
- If a classroom discipline policy is in effect at a school, what is the policy and how is it being enforced?
- If the school facilities have been determined to be safe and adequate, what were the criteria for that determination?
- As academic goals are being addressed, how is student achievement being measured in reading, writing, arithmetic, etc.?
- As textbooks and other instructional materials support the school's instructional program, how current are the materials and are they in adequate supply?

Kossen (1989) described a number of issues which have been voiced about use of the school report cards. A member of the State Board of Education asked whether schools might not use the report cards as a tool to tell the public what it wants to hear. An official with the California School Boards Association asked whether the report cards are missing the point. Parents really want to know how their individual children are performing, and the report cards will not provide this information. Another problem is that the press is likely to look only at controversial areas and take information out of context. An ACSA spokesman noted that the prospect of school comparisons is troubling to many teachers and district officials. Schools may be unfairly judged without considering socioeconomic and other background information. The PTA also expressed concerns that marketing campaigns designed to attract students could be confusing to parents.

The California legislature in 1989 enacted a law (SB 280, Chapter 1463/89) requiring the inclusion of specific financial information in the School Accountability Report Cards. (California Department of Education, 1989) This required information compares the district with the statewide average salaries of teachers, principals, and superintendents, as well as the percentage of budget allocated for teacher and administrative personnel.
Unlike Proposition 98, which left the format and the specific content of the report card up to local school boards, this legislation prescribes in detail what information must be reported and it does so in a way which facilitates comparisons across schools and districts. Before the School Accountability Report Cards existed, there was no legislatively mandated vehicle for reporting information to parents. This legislation appears to set a precedent for the disclosure of information about schools to the public.

Conclusions

This study began with the question whether accountability is best seen as a rational technique for managing change in schools or is it primarily a political symbol. The results of any particular case study cannot be expected to provide definitive answers. Hopefully though, California's experience with the Proposition 98 School Accountability Report Cards sheds some useful light. Given the opportunity to participate, legislators, bureaucrats, administrators, teachers, and parents will represent their interests, some of which overlap, and other interests which may be in conflict. Any single group might be able to propose a coherent model of the educational process and a system of accountability. When all groups must somehow work together, the model of education and system of accountability that results will likely be the result of numerous political compromises on a variety of both major and minor issues. Even if this result is not the most rational or effective that could be imagined, presumably it has still has value in getting people together to work for positive ends.

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